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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 04 BAGHDAD 001027

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SUBJECT: RRT ERBIL: KRG LEADERS WELCOME GREATER U.S.
INVOLVEMENT IN CONFLICTS WITH BAGHDAD

REF: BAGHDAD 811 AND 991

Classified By: PMIN Robert Ford, reasons 1.4(b) and (d).

This is an Erbil Regional Reconstruction Team (RRT) cable.

¶1. (C) Summary: Top Kurdistan Regional Government decision makers (the President, Security Chief and Prime Minister) are interested in USG proposals to reduce tensions in Kirkuk and welcome greater USG involvement in resolving Kurd-Arab tensions. KRG leadership did not eliminate the possibility that the upcoming UNAMI report on Disputed Internal Boundaries (DIBs) might prompt a useful discussion of these issues, but are unwilling to identify any new mechanism for resolving Article 140 issues on the grounds that this undercuts the Constitution. Following up on what appears to have been a productive meeting between KRG Prime Minister Barzani and Prime Minister Maliki (ref), a recent Dawa delegation to the Kurdistan Region may have kicked off some level of political dialogue. However, the general mood on the Kurdish mountaintop among Masoud Barzani and his son, is one of anger and betrayal. We will likely need the help of Masoud's brother-in-law, Nechirvan the Prime Minister, and President Talabani, to help get the KRG into serious political talks with the Maliki government. End summary.

¶2. (U) PMIN met KDP Security Chief Masrur Barzani, Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG) President Masoud Barzani and KRG Prime Minister Nechirvan Barzani on April 5. Deputy Pol Chief John Fox, RRT Team leader (notetaker) and Peter Vrooman, Special Advisor for Northern Iraq attended.

Meeting with Masrur Barzani

¶3. (C) Ambassador Ford explained that the United States Government (USG) would be working harder - in conjunction with the UN - to resolve Arab-Kurd tensions. This did not mean that we had all the solutions - Iraqis would know in detail how best to proceed, but the U.S. would not be sitting on the sidelines. He urged that when UNAMI issues its DIBs reports that the KRG leadership consider carefully how they might be used to facilitate discussions on disputed boundaries. The U.S. would want to play a helpful role in coordination with UNAMI. Masrur Barzani welcomed greater American activism, calling it "long overdue." He stated that problems in Baghdad were not just the result of one person - it was a "whole mentality" reflecting a centralist vision, coupled with the feeling that the Kurds had "more rights than they deserved." Asked about the best mechanism for resolving Article 140, Masrur Barzani insisted that the Iraqi Constitution was the mechanism - the Constitution itself had been a compromise. Article 140 was not pro-Kurdish; it did not pre-judge the outcome of the referendum on Kirkuk. Treating Article 140 as a "favor to the Kurds" had put the discussion on the wrong footing. (Comment: in general, Masrur was not forwarding leaning on using DIBs reports as a basis for negotiation. End Comment.)

¶ 4. (C) Masrur was interested in more details on General Odierno's proposals for lowering tensions and ensuring non-sectarian police forces control energy infrastructure in Kirkuk. He raised concerns over the progress of power-sharing discussions in Kirkuk. It had been agreed that Kurds would receive 32 percent of government staffing, but, according to him, the Arabs and Turcoman believed this only applied to high-level positions. He argued that the 32 percent (for each of the major communities: Kurd, Arab and Opercent (for each of the major communities: Kurd, Arab and Turcoman) needed to apply all the way down the line to the lowest ranking governorate job slots. PMIN noted that we want to see the Article 23 committee come up with a solid way forward on provincial elections and we would engage more there, in coordination with the UNAMI team. PMIN observed that while the Article 23 committee's negotiations are not making rapid progress, security in Kirkuk seemed better. Masrur contested the view that Kirkuk was calmer. According to him, only the methods had changed. Instead of car bombs, assassinations were the new weapon of terror. He claimed there is an Iranian hand behind this, and mentioned that some weapons-depots had been found with Iranian munitions. In contrast, Masrur viewed Turkey as having played a positive role recently and shared his assessment that the GOT supported KRG efforts to promote the path of non-violence among Kurdish communities in the broader region.

¶ 5. (C) Ambassador Ford asked Masrur Barzani his views on a process which would start by asking all sides to reaffirm the Constitution, and then move onto a discussion on implementation of Article 140. Masrur did not reject this idea out of hand, but noted that for its part the KRG had

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always respected the Constitution. Asked for his views on working together on a political dialogue, he struck out at Prime Minister Maliki and by extension, the United States, stating that "you (the USG) let Maliki think that he can run the country by himself." PMIN noted that for months the U.S. had urged the KRG leadership, and especially the KDP, to engage more in Baghdad but instead there was an absence of effective KDP representation in Iraq's capital. Masrur agreed that the representatives of the KRG in Baghdad were not building good relations with other groups. "Even Barham Saleh," according to him, had allowed relations to deteriorate, but he accused PM al-Maliki of circumventing Kurdish channels such as FM Zebari and IA Chief of General Staff Babiker and of refusing to recognize a KRG liaison office in Baghdad.

President Barzani

¶ 6. (C) PMIN opened the meeting by asking that the recent Arab-Kurd security proposals made by General Odierno be given careful consideration. President Barzani reported that they were good in principle - more detail was needed. He added that KRG-Iraqi-U.S. security committees should also be created in Dyala and Ninewa. Asked whether these committees should be separate or unified under one committee, President Barzani responded that a combination of both was needed - committees for each province as well as an overarching committee. The overarching committee could be composed of higher ranking officers from each of the three sides, he suggested.

¶ 7. (C) PMIN observed that President Obama wanted more Embassy focus on problems between the KRG and the Government of Iraq. He promised that President Barzani would see a USG that was more active, and more involved. He thanked President Barzani for the restraint which he had shown, and noted that the USG had also asked PM Maliki to use restraint.

¶ 8. (C) President Barzani responded with a broadside against

the Federal Government. The Kurdistan Region's relationship with the GoI was based on the Constitution. The Constitution had been put aside. A dictatorship was emerging in Baghdad. There was no desire to resolve Kirkuk, nor to let the Kurdish people enjoy the fruits of their accomplishments. The day the United States left Iraq, there would be fighting. PM Maliki had lied to him repeatedly, and reneged on promises. In sum, he had lost any hope in the current government in power in Baghdad. Acknowledging PMIN's message of greater U.S. involvement, he said that if there was any way to remedy the situation, he was certainly not against it. But personally, he had given up hope.

¶9. (C) PMIN emphasized that political dialog, not fighting, was the only way forward. In addition, there was too much rhetoric in the media. Asked about recent political dialogue with the Dawa party, President Barzani reported that political discussions would continue. However - he stated emphatically - he would not himself go to Baghdad. He was embarrassed that his previous visit had not accomplished anything. The five-party committees had been established, but they were "dead committees." He did not think that there was much point in reviving them. He warned that the Kurds would not let the GoI "change the facts on the ground." He was waiting to see if U.S. suggestions for Kirkuk would work.

Otherwise, the 12th Iraqi Army division needed to move out of Kirkuk - and if not, then the Kurds would confront the QoF Kirkuk - and if not, then the Kurds would confront the Division. "This year, all of these things will be solved decisively," he emphasized, adding "If we can, we act in a big way." PMIN stressed that neither the GoI nor the KRG should take any sudden, provocative actions. He cautioned that resolving all of the issues this year was complicated by the fact that it was an election year in Iraq. President Barzani countered that if the issues were not resolved before elections, a "more complicated situation would emerge." PMIN Ford stressed that the time was ripe for a political discussion - especially while U.S. troops were still here. He urged the KRG President consider the next UN reports as an opportunity for discussion of the issues, noting that UN representatives would be briefing the President soon. The UN and the US didn't have a set idea of how to structure those discussions - consultations with Iraqis would be needed, but Iraqis should be thinking about those questions now.

Meeting with Prime Minister Barzani

¶10. (C) Prime Minister Barzani updated PMIN on his recent visit to Baghdad (refs), including meetings with Turkish

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President Gul and with Prime Minister Maliki. He reported that he had told Maliki that problems needed to be solved with dialogue and that Maliki needed to travel to Erbil. As a result, a Dawa delegation had just recently visited Erbil. Now, according to the Prime Minister Barzani, they were waiting for another meeting - but this time between the respective governments rather than party-to-party talks (which the PM said were aimed at dividing the KDP and PUK). "We have to talk," PM Barzani explained. "We may differ, but we need an open dialogue." The Prime Minister expounded with pleasure on his recent meetings with Turkish President Gul. He reported that President Gul stated that having a good relationship with Iraq - and especially with the Kurdistan Region - was a priority, particularly in the economic sphere.

He mentioned that the Turkish Minister of Foreign Trade would travel to the KRG to promote a free-trade zone in Zakko. Although President Gul had taken it very badly that President Barzani did not make the trip (and PM Barzani reported that he and President Talabani had "tried to soothe him"), the Turkish President made clear that it would recognize President Barzani and the Kurdistan Region in accordance with the Iraqi constitution. This, according to Prime Minister Barzani, was extremely important. The PM confided that the Turks still have difficulty pronouncing the

'K word' (for Kurdistan).

¶11. (C) PMIN explained that the new Administration would be more active in helping the KRG and Baghdad resolve their disputes. Both the Prime Minister and Director of Foreign Relations Falah Mustafa Bakir expressed satisfaction with the new approach. Turning to the upcoming UNAMI report, Ambassador Ford expressed the hope that the reports could be the beginning of a political discussion - high-level or working-level - one committee or many committees - the point was to start talking. Prime Minister Barzani agreed that the UN report would at least provide something to discuss, and ventured that one committee - probably at the expert level - should discuss these reports. He explained that "responsible withdrawal" meant that the United States needed to help resolve Article 140 and hydrocarbon legislation before the troops withdraw. The problems between the KRG and the GoI could not be solved by themselves. If there were not coalition forces between the two, there would already be fighting.

¶12. (C) Kirkuk and Mosul were different kinds of problems, explained Prime Minister Barzani. Kirkuk was an "economic problem." The most important issue to resolve was hydrocarbon revenue sharing. Once that was agreed, the canard that the Kurds wanted Kirkuk for its oil would go away, and this would assist with resolution of the problem. Ninewa was a ""political problem." Prime Minister Barzani explained that they were ready to start talking with the Hadba party on cooperation, but rejected any preconditions. Deputy Prime Minister Issawi had been working on this issue, he observed approvingly.

KRG Elections

¶13. (C) PMIN raised the upcoming KRG parliamentary elections, noting that if the KRG really used a closed list system it would generate some criticism among the international community, especially since the rest of Iraq had just finished an election with an open list system. Prime Minister Barzani defended closed lists as helping out the little parties that would not otherwise be able to win any seats on their own. If incorporated into a larger coalition (with a closed list system), then they could be given more seats through political negotiation than they might have been given through direct voting. He intimated that PUK reformer, Nawshirwan Mustapha, would also do better running from within the closed PUK list rather than on his own with an independent list. PMIN observed that the new U.S. Administration hoped that over time the KRG would become more just, more representative and more accountable. Open lists - among other measures - would contribute to achieving this. He asked that KRG leadership think this message over. Prime Minister Barzani agreed that they would think about it. He anticipated that the President of KRG would announce a date soon, but commented that IHEC would need 40 million USD to fund the exercise.

Comment

¶14. (C) We have seen Masoud Barzani bluster before, but his emotions were running especially high against the Baghdad government this time. Part of this was theater to get us to react, and it was an excellent performance. Part of it was

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genuine anger, and we should remember that his attitudes toward Baghdad, and Maliki in particular, are hardening. This will make it more difficult to get him to "yes" in negotiations with Maliki over issues like Kirkuk and DIBs. More positively, Nechirvan was entirely on board with finding ways to negotiate an agreement. (Interestingly, he said he had never told Masoud, his brother-in-law, that it was

Nechirvan's initiative to call on Maliki while Nechirvan was in Baghdad to meet the Turkish President. Nechirvan confided that Masoud would be furious if he knew Nechirvan took the first step.) As we think about how to convince Masoud Barzani to move forward, we need to think about how Nechirvan and President Talabani, both of whom are influential with Masoud, can help UNAMI and our efforts. We will also need to find ways to get Masoud's influential son, Masrur, to be supportive.

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